Glastonbury: the one the Devil didn't win

AUSTIN JOHN MARSHALL on the festival that didn't have a chance — but succeeded due to a human chain of nutters dedicated beyond the call of duty to an ideal outside of themselves

EVERY TIME I think about Glastonbury I get a vision. Not a vision of some supercivilised extra-terresial visitor guided in by Druidic lines of force on the Earth's surface to hand the keys of Space/Time to Merlin, I'm afraid; nor is it a vision of barefoot bronzed children getting a Nobler Society together on brown rice and Divine Light somewhere out in some simple rugged landscape.

This vision is of a Devilish nature, kitted out in '73-style green lame dungarees, 4 in. gold platties, purple eyeshadow with hair and nail varnish to match and holding forth in tones of jaded decadence calculated to make Bob Harris swallow his beard . . .

"Glastonbury? *Glastonbury*" this vision sneers. Holy place my Holy ass — who's going to swallow that precious free festival/peace/love crapola all over again? It's as if I hadn't turned Woodstock into a Coke commercial already — it's as if Radio One's Plastic Rock 'n' Roll Apocalypse had never even happened, let alone Andy Warhol or Little Jimmy Osglitter. Rock music has always been about sub-teenage hangups and about itself. Anyone who tries to tell you different has got to have some kind of angle — right?

Trouble with the Devil — he's always so plausible. Always seems to have the biggest congregation, flashiest cars, the best dope, the best-lookin' chicks, all the sympathy, and he's always at your elbow with some tempting new deal.

And in regard to Glastonbury Fayre, the Devil is dead right.

GLASTONBURY FAYRE was a unique event. A free festival held at Worthy Farm in Somerset, near to Glastonbury Tor, an unopened prehistoric mound with many legendary associations in our history.

12,000 people came, camped out for six days in Midsummer 1971 and heard 38 acts play completely free including Traffic, Terry Reid, Quintessence, Family, Melanie, Arthur Brown's Kingdom Come, Linda Lewis and Fairport Convention.

There was no advertising, no security arrangements, and no trouble with either police or local residents.

All the artists mentioned above are in a feature-length movie made of the festival. The film opened at the Casino Cinerama yesterday (thursday), its London premiere.

There is also on sale a triple album, "Revelations", all tracks of which were donated free by artists like Pete Townshend and the Grateful Dead. Although in no way a sound-track album of the festival, all royalties from the "Revelations" set, like the royalties of artists in the film, will help first to pay off the festival's debts — totalling around £5,000 — and then be donated towards a special ecology trust, and possibly another festival.

Everyone involved *did* have an angle. Andrew Kerr for instance; gent., researcher for Randolph Churchill, English patriot and myth-fancier. With a cool eye for the odds, he wanted to put on the first perfect rock festival in Britain.

After the Isle of Wight Festival in 1970, Kerr felt that rock festivals were becoming a way whereby a large number of simple, trusting souls risked pneumonia whilst allowing themselves to be ripped off by promoters, bands, police and press alike and, in so doing, were helping to make a few resourceful fellows large amounts of loot.

Despite all that, Kerr still felt that rock festivals were potentially the most exciting phenomena for good changes in society.

But why all the fences and enclosures? Why all the aggro? Why all the security? Why all the business heavies?

The perfect rock festival Kerr wanted had — above all — to dispense with what had come to seem indispensible. And all the unnecessary hangups seemed to come from bread. So it had to be a free event in every sense.

A tweak on the Devil's tail — just for fun.

THE FIRST artist who listened was Jimi Hendrix, who said "Yes — you get it on — I'll play free."

Heartened, Kerr went off to look for a site — it had to be a really special place. So he went to Stonehenge. There, the chain-link fencing and the Army's galumphing presence were beginning to depress him when the news of Jimi's death depressed him even more.

Kerr was staying with friends at Worthy Farm, Somerset, and falling under the spell of nearby Glastonbury Tor.

Meanwhile . . . a bearded dude called Bill Harkin received an ESP message (as Harkin describes it) and drove to the Tor, introduced himself to Kerr and with the aid of dowsers showed him exactly the right site for the festival.

Harkin (an environmental architect) then designed a stage in a perfect 1/10 replica of The Great Pyramid, to be built in scaffolding and wire mesh.

A loose association of friends became a company — Solstice Capers (the date for the festival having been fixed for the Summer Solstice 1971) who set to with a will, firstly to raise or donate bread to rent the farm, hire lights and sound gear, contact bands who would be likely to play for free, and sound out local residents.

Already I hear my Devil saying suspiciously — "It's all very well for a bunch of elitist nobs to work for nothing on some big altruistic back-to-the-earth kick — what about the rest of us in the big bad world earning an honest crust?"

To which John Coleman (Frendz writer who enters the ranks of Glastonbury caperers at this point having gone down to do a piece and deciding on the spot to stay and help) replies that there was never the slightest difficulty in getting volunteers down to Worthy Farm — the only problem seemed to be to keep the several hundred souls already camping down at the farm out of each other's way.

"Kerr insisted that anyone with a useful idea should have complete freedom from interference. He was very insistent that the Fayre should be no one's individual ego-trip."

Indeed, the chief Glastonbury zealot now seems to become Coleman, who eventually went on to coax all the free tracks out of the artists who contributed to the "Revelations" album.

No particular effort to sell the festival from this point appears to have been necessary. In the end a total of 38 bands and soloists played unpaid, and unbilled, and about 12,000 people came to hear them and see if it was all true. It was.

MEANWHILE . . . no one doubted that a film would sort of vibe itself into existence. On vibes . . . Mischa Norland — documentary film-maker, gent, and myth-fancier.

Among people he approached was Sy Litvinoff (Executive Producer of "A Clockwork Orange") who put up a basic minimum of £20,000 for stock, crew and lights, and to hire Nicolas Roeg ("Performance") to direct.

Among the eight camera crews on the site was Peter Neal, himself a rockumentary director (Hendrix and the String Band). On this occasion he was well content to wander round and enjoy the festival and shoot a little movie from time to time.

Neal now takes up the story: "Roeg wasn't really trying to make a rock movie — he was very seriously into the background of the area and its history, I think. Anyway, he left before the end, feeling ill.

"There was never any particular effort to co-ordinate the shooting — the film stock didn't turn up until the second day of the festival. I was really moved by the idealism and utter spontaneous goodness coming out of everyone, and I was disappointed when nothing seemed to happen to the film afterwards."

Christmas 1971. The year has turned to the winter solstice. 110,000 feet of 16mm Glastonbury Fayre is lying unedited, and mostly unviewed in the vaults.

Sanford Lieberson of Good Times ("Performance" producer) approaches Peter Neal to see if there's a possible rescue job to be done.

It took about three weeks for Neal to view the material, and sort it, and take a chance on saying yes. Contract agreements from bands and organising the cash (a further £20,000 being budgeted for completion which must add up to one of the cheapest feature movies ever made in Britain) took about four months, so work began in about May of '72.

It took about three months to correct synchronisation problems, and to get the relevant bands to help out with some small but crucial bits of sound overdubbing, then a further three months to complete editing, and then a *further* three months to get a satisfactory 35mm blow-up for cine projection.

And now, since February this year, the film has been looking for distribution, having been turned down flat by both the major chains.

THE FILM'S opening this week at one of the country's best cinemas is a triumph for a movie that, by all normal rules, should never have happened (but did mainly through the doggedness of Neal — one of the country's master film editors) about a festival that didn't have a chance (but did due to a human chain of nutters dedicated well beyond the call of duty to an ideal outside themselves).

Make no mistake — it's a good, zappy movie. None of the seams show. All the music's good, particularly Terry Reid, Fairport and Traffic. The sound and picture quality is first-rate, and the camera coldly exposes anyone who appears to be attempting to exploit Glastonbury for their own purposes — the boy Guru who had the plug pulled out on him . . . Arthur Brown affectionately deflated by the announcement that it was his birthday.

The flavour is on the whole light-hearted and Neal has allowed the message of the film to remain implicit. It's there though — the total flow created from diversity.

This is the best rock you can find, in the best context we can allow it, artists seen working under the most sympathetic conditions, for the consideration through the film of a possibly wider audience.

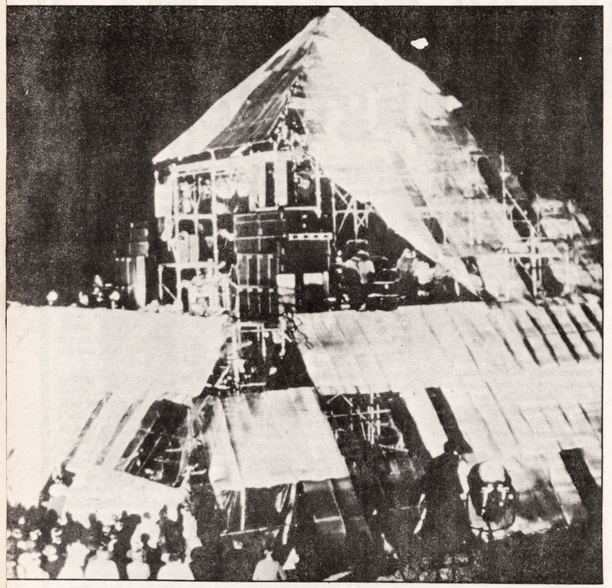
No one believes any more that the world's problems will be solved merely by 12,000 people getting together around a home-made pyramid.

"But," says John Coleman, "events like Glastonbury will help us to keep a more open access to our feelings: will help us to be able to see what's wrong and say: 'It doesn't have to stay wrong'".

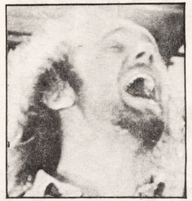
See the movie. Get Zapped. Take away what you can. Then make your own Glastonbury of the Heart, because if you don't, some Devil is going to take away your ability to believe that Glastonbury could ever have been possible.

***AUSTIN JOHN MARSHALL** is a film producer, journalist and scriptwriter*

The Glastonbury stage: scaffolding and wire mesh replica of The Great Pyramid



***ROGER CHAPMAN/FAMILY:** Among 38 acts that played for free.*



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